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ABSTRACT

The goals and nature of liberal education, the status of psychology within liberal arts, and the undergraduate practicum are discussed. A new development in psychology has been the practicum course, which some critics have claimed is a threat to the goals of liberal education. It is claimed that three dimensions are persistent themes in most definitions of liberal arts: the development of broad knowledge, critical judgment, and self-exploration. Among the threats to the concepts of a liberal education are the following: a "new vocationalism" whereby education is defined in terms of marketable skills; the presence of professional or preprofessional baccalaureate programs; the professionalization of existing undergraduate courses; alternative models of education, such as cooperative education and the "credit for living" mechanisms for earning college credit; and new forms of management within colleges and universities that demand accountability and that exert pressure to indicate measurable outcomes that can compete with vocational training and preprofessional education. While the combination of lecture, reading, and tests is the device most frequently used to teach undergraduates, others argue that learning is facilitated by participation and a more active role by students. In the practicum the student spends the majority of time outside the classroom. It is suggested that the practicum has the potential to be an excellent addition to a liberal education or to be the opposite, a form of closeted vocational training. (SW)

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Undergraduate Practicum in a Liberal Education

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Undergraduate Practicum in a Liberal Education

Psychology departments in universities and colleges are so commonplace today that most people overlook the fact that, as an academic discipline, psychology is an infant in comparison with the "traditional" disciplines. Although a newcomer to the field, psychology had its beginning in other disciplines such as philosophy and education, and its early struggles for identity were shaped by these parental forces. Thus, some dpeartments allied themselves with the natural sciences, others with social sciences and still others retained their philosophy or education ties. However, regardless of historical ties, psychology at the undergraduate level has typically perceived itself as contributing to a liberal education rather than to professional or vocational training.

Psychology and Its Liberal Education Goals

One of the most cogent and prophetic reports about the status and role of emerging psychology within liberal arts was the Harvard Commission Report entitled, " The Place of P sychology in an Ideal University" which was completed in 1947 (Gregg, 1970). Even as early as 1947 the rapidly growing areas of social and clinical psychology were seen as threats to the discipline of psychology because of their nontraditional metholologies and their interests in applied work. The report recommended that scientific methodology be the core of the discipline, and that psychology courses would benefit students most if they were taught to approach the subject matter of each course in a questioning or scientific manner. This scientific emphasis should be the thread that would tie together all the developing fields within psychology. At that time, scientific inquiry seemed to be most appropriately taught in a laboratory setting, and such laboratory courses were at the heart of the report's recommended curriculum.

Psychology training was viewed as helpful for people entering a variety of professions, but psychology courses were not viewed as providing job training, and psychology majors were not to be identified as "psychologists." Career training in psychology was to occur only at the graduate level.

Undergraduate psychology curricula in this country have been the focus of three national reviews and surveys, summarized in the Wolfle Report (Wolfle, Buxton, Cofer, Gustard, MacLeod, & McKeachie, 1952), the Michigan Report (McKeachie & Milholland, 1961), and the Kulik Report (Kulik, 1973). Each report surveyed the current state of psychology curricula and summarized trends. In all three reports, the reviewers emphasized that the vast majority of students in psychology courses were non majors and that for majors and non majors alike a general liberal education emphasis seemed preferable to a vocational or professional one. The Wolfle Report recommended that all course offerings include scientific methodology (a separate experimental or methodology course would be redundant). Specifically excluded were courses aimed at improving student adjustment or imparting technical skills. The Michigan Report reiterated the importance of the goals of a liberal education but acknowledged that a variety of curricular designs were available to teach methodology. These included attaching laboratories to some courses and including special independent study courses or senior research projects. By the time of the Kulik Report in 1973 several trends in course offerings were apparent. During the twenty year period since the first survey it was clear that courses in the natural science areas (learning, motivation, physiological) and independent study had shown the greatest percentage of increase over time. Applied courses such as educational psychology, vocational psychology,

and adjustment courses showed the greatest decline. However, this decline in popularity of applied courses was accompanied by a new development in psychology, the practicum course. Approximately 44 % of the 1969 respondents to Kulik's survey indicated that they offered courses which involved some degree of field experience, and almost 16 % mentioned field experience as a recent innovation in their departments. From the limited information available in the Kulik Report it seems likely that by 1969 many psychology departments had instituted an experiential component to education that the earlier Wolfle Report would have specifically excluded. Also, by this time several departments reported opening specialized tracks within their major for students interested in working in such jobs as personnel psychology and mental health occupations.

Perhaps encouraged by the popularity of practicum courses and by other forces within higher education, psychology departments have developed a plethoria of practicum experiences as documented by several articles in Teaching of Psychology (eg. Barton & Duerfeldt, 1980; Prerost, 1981; VandeCreek & Thompson, 1977). Simultaneously, critics of higher education, primarily from outside of psychology had begun proclaiming that practicum is an obvious threat to the goals of liberal education and that practicum is nothing more than glorified vocational training. It is necessary to review briefly some of the elements of this turmoil over liberal education before addressing this issue of practicum in a liberal education and within psychology specifically.

Definition of Liberal Education

The concept of a liberal education has traditionally been attributed to the Greeks and defined generally as an education which liberates and

frees the person. Many professional journals highlight the continuing scholarly efforts to more specifically define a liberal education and to implement it. Bennett (1977) has summarized many of these definitions and concluded that there have been three consistent themes which characterize most definitions of liberal arts and liberal education. These are the development of broad knowledge, critical judgment, and self-sxploration.

The emphasis on broad knowledge identifies a liberal education in terms of breadth and depth of content studied. It is typically implemented in colleges with a set of required courses from a variety of areas of the curriculum plus an in-depth study of a major and minor area. This is a modern version of the medieval liberal arts curriculum of the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy). The aim is to provide information in, and perspective on, the major areas of human concern. It is important to note that the educational system of the Greeks and the medieval person was designed for only a chosen few, and that the content of the curriculum was designed to meet the needs of these chosen few. As such, the courses can be viewed as basic skills courses, that is, skills for the "job" of being a gentleman. The content of the courses met the needs of the available students in the context of their society.

The second theme emphasizes manner of approach to subject matter rather than its content. The objective is to teach the student to recognize and use different methods of inquiry and to recognize their assumptions. The teaching of scientific methodology would be a good example. The emphasis is not on acquiring information but on acquiring intellectual skills and critical judgment. This is process rather than product oriented.

Personal struggle and a quest for meaning characterize the third theme of self-exploration. This implies that the student should be exposed to the problems of human existence and the meaning of life, especially one's own. This quest incorporates questions of values and tolerance for differences. Self-exploration can occur in many contexts, most of which should not earn academic credit. To be credit-worthy, the self-exploration must occur in the context of broad knowledge and critical thinking applied to the study of historical, cultural, and personal forces in one's life. The development of a philosophy of life involves confrontation with a variety of value systems, and a liberal education should foster such confrontations as well as encourage the student to identify a system one is prepared to accept and support.

These three dimensions are persistent themes in most definitions of liberal arts. An education incorporating all three should be liberating, providing the means for individuals to understand their relationship to the larger environment in which they live. Such persons will be broadly trained to shape events, or at least to understand them rather than being totally influenced by them. In contrast to vocational training, such an education should be liberating rather than limiting, it should be preparation for a lifetime rather than for the moment, and it should prepare students to think and act with independence and with good judgment.

While a liberal education is often defined as the opposite of vocational training, the liberally educated person should in the long run be the best employee, leader, parent, and citizen (Enteman, 1979). This relationship between a liberal education and vocations is typified by a statement by John Stuart Mill, "Men are mem before they are lawyers or

physicians, or manufacturers; and if you make them capable and sensible men they will make themselves capable and sensible lawyers or physicians" (Cited in Stephenson & Sexton, 1974, p 2-3).

However, a liberating education can never be divorced from its cultural context. What produced a liberated Greek or nineteenth-century aristocrat will not suffice for most twentieth-centurn students (Bennett, 1977). A liberal education must provide a means for the individual to understand his or her relationship to the larger environment and the functioning of the society. As society changes, so too must the academic curriculum. Sidney Hook, whom some regard as a spokesman for traditional liberal education, contends that educational institutions "must teach not merely the facts, but how to test them, how to relate them to problems, and how they bear upon relevant alternatives" (Cited in Stephenson & Sexton, 1974, p. 3).

Threats to Liberal Education

Some educational commentators believe that this vision of liberating education has been clouded and has reached a crisis state in recent years. Others claim that liberal education actually has become obsolete or has failed as evidenced by worsening social problems. Several threats have been cited as endangering the concepts of a liberal education.

One of the foremost threats is the "new vocationalism." It down-plays the goals of liberal education as impractical, out-of-date, unnecessary, and without attraction to most students. The goals of education should be defined in terms of marketable skills. This conviction is further supported by student interests which are clearly in the areas where career training is available such as business, computer science, and nursing,.to name just three. One survey (Peterson, 1968) found that about 25 % of college students choose vocational preparation as a better description of their educational philosophy than an academic or liberal arts philosophy.

Sagen (1978, 1979) has contended that liberal education must compete with vocationalism by steadily emphasizing more career related competencies. In fact, he proposes that liberal education should include a credentialing of skills, a proof of specific competencies. "Competence simply defined, is 'what one can do,' and competence in relevant tasks is what the employer seeks and what the applicant must demonstrate" (Sagen, 1979, p. 152). In contrast, Enteman (1979) refers to Sagen's proposed strategy to insert vocational training into liberal education as "incrementalism," with the eventual outcome being a suffocation of liberal arts. Others (French, 1979; Goldwin, 1976) fear that this process is already well underway. French (1979) lamented, "Indeed I would venture that most institutions have opened the gates and let them in! You know who they are; those business administration, allied health, social service types" (p. 470).

French's comment identifies a second, long-standing threat to liberal education, namely the presence of professional or preprofessional bachalaurette programs. Engineers, accountants, nurses, computer programmers, social workers, and teachers, to name a few, gain entry into jobs or professions with an undergraduate degree. The liberal arts components of such curricula are frequently viewed by students with disinterest, as an unnecessary impediment on their way into a career. The presence of such clearly career-oriented curricula place heavy strain on students who may not fare as well in the job market.

The development of community colleges further accentuates this pressure. Community colleges serve a large number of students who will terminate their education after two or three years in a curriculum with a heavy emphasis on vocational preparation.

A third threat to liberal education is the professionalization of

existing undergraduate courses. Higher education was initially designed in the United States to provide four years of liberal studies between secondary schooling and career preparation. Courses were supposed to contribute to general education goals rather than to specialized professional objectives. But as professional schools developed and required collegiate preparation for entry and as other students demanded more career relevant training, the tendency grew to begin specialization within the college curriculum. At the present time, the first course in a discipline is sometimes viewed by faculty as the first step up the ladder to a Ph.D. Faculty are excited most by those students who are perceived as following in their footsteps, who want to assist with research and who want to attend graduate schools. Stiles (1974) concluded that only philosophy and classical languages are left in most colleges as pure liberal arts oriented with no obvious vocational or professional push.

These pressures are compounded by faculty members who are specialists and whose jobs as academicians include contributing to their disciplines. Recruitment for faculty positions routinely favors specialists rather than generalists, and later promotions will most often be granted to those who are productive as researchers rather than good liberal education teachers. In some schools the lower level courses (eg. General Psychology) which can touch the lives of the most students and which may be able to contribute most to a liberal education are actually the least preferred courses to teach (French, 1979; Stiles, 1974).

Another threat to the liberal education concept has emerged in the form of alternative models of education such as cooperative education and the "credit for living" mechanisms for earning college credit. These alternatives routinely place heavy emphasis upon career preparation and

obtaining the "union card" with less emphasis upon liberal education. As a measure of the rapid growth of alternative forms of education, Keeton (1977) reported that the number of cooperative education programs grew from about 100 in 1960 to 1030 in 1975.

A final perceived threat to liberal education comes from new forms of management within colleges and universities which demand accountability. This drive for efficiency is made necessary by diminishing resources and declining enrollments. Elaborate models, borrowed from industry, are now available for the analysis of faculty activity, measurement of productivity, attainment of management specified objectives, and the impact of resources on curricular change (Stephenson & Sexton, 1974). This movement is encouraged in no small degree by pressures from legislatures, taxpayers, parents, and students. All demand assurances that they are getting their money's worth from higher education.

While issues of accountability are not foreign or necessarily antagonistic to liberal education, coming in the context of the other threats noted above, liberal education proponents feel hard pressed to point to measureable outcomes which can compete with vocational training, preprofessional education, and job market demands. Some defenders of liberal education also seem to react to any changes in education as if they were automatically destructive. Practicum courses have sometimes been criticized as naive vocationalism without much regard for how the course was taught. Actually, threats to liberal education have always existed in some form (Stiles, 1974), and if liberal education is to be reflective of and responsive to its cultural context, then it should be expected to change. However, those who fear that liberal education is an endangered species may include practicum with vocational training since there are some common elements and condemn the entire movement.

From Theory to Practice

Turning from the concept of liberal education and its current traumas to the process of teaching to produce a liberal education will lead us to a consideration of the potential role of practicum in the learning process.

The combination of lecture, reading, and tests is the device most frequently used to teach undergraduates. This is based on the assumption that the student's mind is a willing receptacle for information and that he or she can then transform the information into genuine learning and understanding (Stephenson & Sexton, 1974). However, others argue that learning is facilitated by participation and a more active role by students. Candland (1980) recently stated that a liberal education should produce persons "who both think and act" (p. 195), and that this combination of "thinking and doing" provides the best of education. Many instructors incorporate this principle into their courses. For example, in a math class, the instructor may discuss theorems and derive several formulae, but then the students will be asked to "do" homework. In a physics class the discussion may center around theories, but the student will eventually put these theories into practice in a laboratory. Similarly, courses in foreign languages include translation, and courses in music include practice. However, in other areas such as geology, forestry, and anthropology the laboratory setting is actually outside of the university.

According to Stephenson and Sexton (1974) these variations in degree of student involvement in the learning process and the diversity of settings for teaching and learning involve a continuum along several dimensions such as: (a) dependence on the use of a formal classroom; (b) dependence on lectures as a mechanism of teaching; (c) dependence on the professor as the prime source of information; and (d) degree of opportunity for application of theory into practice.

Courses which emphasize the traditional techniques of lectures and tests fall at one end of the continuum while laboratory courses and courses utilizing occasional field trips fall in the middle. Practicum courses would come at the other end of this continuum of teaching-learning. In practicum, the student spends the majority of time outside the classroom. Participation in some form of agency work replaces the lecture and instructor as the main source of information. However, it is essential in practicum that the student apply the same intense analysis and reflection as demanded by other classroom oriented approaches, and here the relationship to the instructor is crucial. It is through the interaction of these three elements of information obtained by participation in the agency, readings, and supervision by the instructor that the student learns how thinking and doing are integrated into understanding. Regardless of the setting (classroom or field placement) the goals of a liberal education remain the same, namely producing broad knowledge, critical judgment, and self-exploration.

There is a commonly held assumption that practicum is basically professional or vocational in nature, and there is no doubt that there are career advantages in practicum. However, career advantages alone do not justify including practicum in a liberal education curriculum. What does justify its inclusion is its contribution to obtaining these liberal education goals, and it can do that if it is managed similar to a laboratory experience. As well, "nothing reinforces a good theory and cements it to mind like a living application of it" (Stephenson & Sexton, 1974, p. 19). The best teachers from Socrates to Christ to those of the present have promoted this principle. Quotes such as "Faith without works is dead" (The New English Bible, 1971, paraphrase), and "knowledge without action is an affectation and...action without knowledge is usually a disaster

(Candland, 1980, p. 195) all reflect this principle that good education must always involve a combination of thinking and doing.

The Case of Psychology

It is important to combine the elements of the definition of a liberal education (development of broad knowledge, critical judgment, and self-exploration) with the methods of good education (thinking and doing) to evaluate the position of psychology within liberal education. Earlier it was noted that psychology as an academic discipline has placed heavy emphasis upon scientific methodology. This is an example of the second element of a liberal education (development of critical judgment). The Michigan and Kulik reports also stressed the importance of teaching students how to "do" the methodology by incorporating laboratories into some courses. So, both thinking and doing are properly emphasized in such courses.

The other two elements of liberal education (development of broad knowledge and self-exploration) present a different picture. A psychology curriculum usually includes several "content" or nonlaboratory courses which are designed to present the current knowledge in a special area of psychology. While the methodology of that specialty may also be included many such courses make the content primary and the methodology secondary. Such courses may meet the goal of development of broad knowledge. But such courses often follow a lecture-reading-testing method without much of a "doing" component. What is the "doing" element in a child psychology course if the research methodology element is made secondary? While field trips and natural observations may be added to such courses, the student still remains a passive observer, and these tools in no way equal the rigor of a research project in a laboratory course. To obtain a thorough, hands-on "doing" in a child psychology course, students should

interact with children to evaluate and add to the classroom and textbook "thinking" component.

The third element of a liberal education, self-exploration, also requires a "doing" component. Self-exploration occurs continuously with living, but if the exploration is to occur in any predictable manner and with academic credit it should be accomplished with the guidance of a teacher and in the context of the thinking component of education.

Ideally, the "doing" components should be closely integrated with the "thinking" component of the course content and supervised or reviewed by the instructor. Thus, each instructor of each course could be asked to include a "doing" element. However, just as the recommendation of the Wolfle Report to teach methodology in every course rather than in a separate course turned out to be unwieldy, so too it may be impractical to attach a sufficient "doing" component to each content course. The application of some psychology principles and the pursuit of self-exploration cannot always be achieved within the confines of a classroom or even on a college campus. The "doing" may require a different kind of setting and a different kind of course structure, one that we can call practicum. Viewed from this perspective as the "doing" component of many content areas and as part of meeting the goals of liberal education, practicum has an essential place in the curriculum. The specific career advantages and vocational skills which may be attained during a practicum must be of clear secondary importance to the major goals of a liberal education.

Current Undergraduate Psychology Practica

The available literature on psychology practica is of the "how-to-do-it" variety with summaries of how specific programs are operated. Several

authors have described their strategies of managing specific programs (Barton & Duerfeldt, 1980; Hess, Harrison, Shantz, Fink, Zepelin, Lilliston, Aponte, & Korn, 1978; Prerost, 1981; VandeCreek & Thompson, 1977). Problems with site and student selection, evaluations of students, agency supervision, amount of academic credit, and financial and time constraints on the department have been popular issues. Other authors have described specific types of settings in which students have been placed (Prerost, 1981; Hess et al, 1978; Caffrey, Berger, Cole, Marx, & Senn, 1977). Prerost (1981) and Shiverick (1977) have elaborated on the advantages and problems of fulltime placements. Finally, Pinkus and Korn (1973) described a fairly short-lived preprofessional undergraduate practicum program which had a distinctly vocational training flavor to it.

There is no information of a national scope about how practicum is viewed or implemented in psychology departments. Such issues as the percentage of departments which operate practicum programs, why they chose to implement one, how resources are allocated, what criteria are used to select and evaluate students and sites, and what types of placements are available to students are all very relevant to our understanding of the current status of practicum within psychology departments. Practicum may well be the most significant new development in undergraduate psychology curricula. It has the potential to be an excellent addition to a liberal education or to be the opposite, a form of closeted vocational training. Psychology should be clear about its intentions with this course and about how it is implemented.

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